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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 2164 (2014), by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and requested me to report to it every three months on the implementation of the resolution and the progress on the implementation of the Mission's mandate. The present report covers the period from 17 December 2014 to 19 March 2015.

II. National political dialogue and reconciliation

Inter-Malian dialogue

2. During the reporting period and against a backdrop of a serious increase in the number of armed clashes, the parties to the inter-Malian dialogue held a fifth round of talks in Algiers. At the conclusion of the talks a revised draft peace agreement was presented by the mediation team and initialled by two of the three Malian parties. Throughout this period, in close coordination with the mediation team, MINUSMA continued to encourage the parties to reconfirm their ceasefire commitments and to reach an agreement through consultations with the parties and with their constituencies.

3. Between the conclusion of the fourth round of talks on 27 November and the resumption of the inter-Malian dialogue on 16 February, Algeria, the lead mediator, held bilateral consultations with each of the parties to the talks, namely, the Government of Mali, the Coordination, comprising the Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), the Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA), the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA), the Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance II (CMFPR-II) and a faction of the Coalition du peuple de l'Azawad (CPA), and the Platform, composed mainly of CMFPR-I, CPA, a faction of MAA and the Groupe d'autodefense touareg Imghad et alliés (GATIA). The discussions focused on the provisions of the draft peace agreement, which had been drafted and distributed by the mediation, comprising Algeria, the United Nations/MINUSMA, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and the

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Niger at the end of the fourth round of talks, as described in my previous report (S/2014/851, para. 8).

4. The Malian parties also held consultations with their constituencies prior to the resumption of the fifth round. The Coordination and the Platform engaged at different levels with their respective bases, while the Government organized a round table with key political and civil society actors in Bamako on 7 February. Opposition parties did not attend, arguing that they had not been consulted on the agenda of the meeting, and participants at the Government round table rejected the concept of "Azawad", as well as the proposed establishment of quotas to ensure the representation of all communities in State institutions. MINUSMA organized three workshops with political parties from the presidential majority and the opposition (7 and 8 January), women (13 and 14 January) and youth leaders (16 and 17 January) to provide them with an overview of the process that had led to the elaboration of the draft peace agreement as well as of its content.

5. On 27 January in Algiers, following serious armed clashes between the Coordination and the Platform in and around Tabankort (Gao region), Algeria chaired a meeting with the Government of Mali, the Coordination and my Special Representative for Mali, Mr. Mongi Hamdi, to discuss the security situation in northern Mali. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Algeria, Mr. Ramtane Lamamra, and my Special Representative issued a communiqué calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities; respect for the ceasefire agreement of 23 May 2014, notably in Intillit, Tabankort, Tarkint and Tessit (Gao region); and the prompt holding of a meeting of the Mixed Technical Commission on Security. It also announced the deployment of MINUSMA troops to the areas occupied by the armed groups to protect civilians. The Platform, which was not present at the meeting, objected to the communiqué and its references to areas under its control.

6. From 5 to 9 February in Algiers, my Special Representative convened an extraordinary session of the Comité de suivi et d'évaluation, established by the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement of 18 June 2013, to seek the reconfirmation of the parties' commitment to the cessation of hostilities and the ceasefire management mechanisms. On 14 February, he issued a summary by the Chair of the committee calling on the parties to end hostilities, refrain from acts of provocation and ensure a conducive environment for the holding of the talks. In parallel, my Special Representative and Algeria facilitated the signature on 19 February of a declaration by the parties, reaffirming their commitment to the cessation of hostilities and their participation in the ceasefire management mechanisms.

7. The fifth round of the inter-Malian dialogue took place in Algiers from 16 February to 1 March in the presence of senior representatives of all parties, during that time the mediation held separate negotiations with each party on the text of the draft peace agreement. The parties welcomed the document as a good basis for negotiation. However, their positions on substantive issues remained unchanged. The Government of Mali continued to oppose federalism in any form. It also reiterated its opposition to constitutional revision and the use of "Azawad" in the agreement, claiming it was a tactic by the Coordination to pave the way for secession. The Coordination maintained its insistence on a federal State and the recognition of "Azawad" as a political, geographical and cultural entity that would include the Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu regions. It also reiterated its opposition to the

return of the Malian defence and security forces to the north and repeated the need for the security forces and the management of natural resources to be led by the people of "Azawad". The Platform restated its request for a direct election system for regional authorities, called for a rapid redeployment of the Malian defence and security forces to the north that would include former Platform combatants, and suggested that the management of national resources be shared between the State and regional authorities.

8. On 25 February the mediation presented a revised draft agreement to the parties that sought to incorporate some of the feedback from the parties and to reach a compromise among their positions. The draft proposes a political, security and development package for enhanced regionalization within a unitary Malian State providing, inter alia, (a) the strengthening of the authority of regional assemblies and local governments, as well as the creation of a second parliamentary chamber and the introduction of quotas to ensure representation of northerners in State institutions, subject to a revision of the Constitution; (b) the return of the Malian defence and security forces to the north, the integration of former armed group combatants in a reformed Malian force as part of a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process and the creation of local police forces in the north; (c) the establishment of economic development zones in the three northern regions and the possibility of interregional cooperation; and (d) a national conference to address outstanding issues, in particular regarding the references to "Azawad". The draft agreement envisages an interim period of 18 to 24 months before the provisions of the agreement take effect and the establishment of a committee on the implementation of the agreement, chaired by Algeria, to support and oversee implementation efforts. It is envisaged that MINUSMA would direct the secretariat of the committee.

9. In presenting this draft peace agreement, the mediation announced that no further substantive changes to the text would be accepted and invited the parties to initial the document. On 1 March, the Government, the Platform, all members of the mediation team, as well as France in its capacity as observer to the talks, initialled the document, while the Coordination requested additional time to consult with its constituency. Further to the conclusion of the talks in Algiers, the Prime Minister of the Niger, Mr. Brigi Rafini, facilitated a meeting of the Coordination leadership in Niamey on 8 March to discuss the draft peace agreement. My Special Representative also attended that meeting, and MINUSMA provided logistical support.

10. Consultations by the leadership of the Coordination with their supporters in Kidal continued from 12 to 15 March. At their conclusion, the Coordination issued a communiqué stating that the draft peace agreement did not take into account the aspirations of the people of "Azawad" and requested a meeting with the mediation and international partners to discuss the way forward. On 17 March, my Special Representative led a delegation comprising key members of the mediation team and representatives of China, France and the Russian Federation to Kidal. The delegation reiterated to the Coordination leaders that negotiations would not be reopened and the text of the draft agreement would not be revised. However, they agreed to pursue consultations so that some of the Coordination's observations might be taken into consideration during the implementation phase. At the end of the meeting, the Coordination issued a statement, requesting the mediation to consider a number of observations regarding the draft peace agreement in order to

allow them to proceed to signing the agreement. On the same day, the Government indicated that it would not agree to reopen the text of the draft agreement for negotiation. In a communiqué of 18 March, the mediation reiterated its position that the negotiations were complete but that the Coordination's concerns could be addressed during the implementation phase. The mediation decided that Algeria would invite the Coordination leadership to Algiers to discuss how to proceed to initialling and signing the peace agreement.

Other major political developments

12. Meanwhile, on 8 January, the President of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, accepted the resignation of Moussa Mara as Prime Minister and appointed Modibo Keïta, formerly his high representative for the inter-Malian inclusive dialogue, as Prime Minister. On 10 January, Mr. Modibo Keïta formed a government comprising 28 members, of whom six were newly-appointed and three were women. None of the ministers from the previous government associated with corruption allegations was reappointed.

13. On 10 February, the National Assembly adopted a bill on the status of the opposition. The bill formalizes the rights, obligations and duties of the opposition parties and sets out modalities for the position of the leader of the opposition, who will act as a spokesperson and be given benefits equal to those of the First Vice-President of the National Assembly. The leader's official duties and activities are to be covered by the national budget.

14. On 31 December, the Government concluded the nationwide administrative census to update the civil registries, having enrolled 1,879,419 persons, of whom 448,374 were newly registered. The estimated number of Malian voters is now 7,876,879. With the support of the United Nations Integrated Electoral Team, the Government updated the voters' list and established a new biometric electoral list for the future municipal and regional elections. On 18 February, a ministerial decree set 26 April as the date of the communal and regional elections. However, the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization subsequently postponed those elections for the third time, without setting a date, on the grounds of instability in the northern regions and the absence of State administrators in many northern districts.

III. Security, stabilization and protection of civilians

15. The reporting period was dominated by a marked increase in insecurity as a result of more frequent clashes between Coordination and Platform armed groups; widespread banditry, particularly targeting vehicles and convoys; and high levels of violent extremist activity. Extremist groups continued to conduct operations in the Kidal region, including attacks against MINUSMA and the French forces of Operation Barkhane, and were increasingly active in other regions, including Mopti and Ségou in the west of Mali.

Clashes between compliant armed groups

16. On 20 December, MAA-Coordination combatants based in Ber and Didi (Timbuktu region) attacked Bamba (Gao region) before being repelled by the Platform. MAA-Platform and GATIA combatants based in Tabankort (Gao region)

retaliated by seizing Zahro (Timbuktu region) from the Coordination on 24 December. Bamba and Zahro are two crossing points on the northern bank of the Niger River. On 1 January, GATIA threatened to attack Ber if the Coordination refused to hand over six GATIA members in its custody. MINUSMA intervened with the GATIA leadership, warning that the Mission would use force, in accordance with its mandate and rules of engagement, if GATIA attacked Ber and placed peacekeepers and the local population in imminent danger. GATIA withdrew from the outskirts of Ber to Zahro on 3 January and from Bamba in the second half of January. The Malian Armed Forces established a post in Bamba early in February, intensifying widespread allegations of collusion between the Platform and the Government.

16. Competition for the control of strategic commercial and trafficking routes lies behind many of the armed clashes in northern Mali, including in the context of the fighting over Bamba and Zahro from 20 to 24 December. Following the closure of the nearby crossing point of the Niger River at Didi, control of Bamba and Zahro, located on the northern bank of the river, became critical for trans-Sahel trafficking. For example, aerial pictures taken by MINUSMA unmanned aerial systems on 24 December showed two convoys of trucks loaded with cigarettes and escorted by different armed groups. MINUSMA also received information on tensions between factions of the Coordination over the control of commercial routes. Early in February, in Menaka (Gao region), MNLA reportedly hijacked a truck that was transporting drugs from Gao to the Niger under the protection of the MAA-Coordination.

17. The impact of armed clashes on civilians in and around Tabankort town (Gao region) was a particular concern. Mounting tensions between the Coordination and the Platform led MINUSMA to dispatch long-range patrols and deploy a unit of 36 soldiers to Tabankort on 12 January. On 16 January, the Coordination attacked Platform positions in the town. Twenty-two civilians sought refuge at the Mission's temporary camp and MINUSMA reinforced its troops there. On 17 January, at least six GATIA combatants reportedly died while several others were wounded. Over the course of the fight to control Tabankort, MINUSMA medically evacuated to Gao 13 civilians and 6 Platform members who were no longer fighting. MINUSMA also provided medical care for 25 Platform fighters. The Mission subsequently undertook two integrated missions to assess the impact of the fighting on civilians and to engage community leaders on potential reconciliation initiatives.

18. Armed clashes however continued and, on 20 January, the Coordination fired heavy machine guns and rockets into Tabankort close to the MINUSMA position as well as civilian locations. MINUSMA sent two attack helicopters to monitor the situation and to deter further firing. As the Coordination continued to fire rockets, MINUSMA helicopters fired warning shots that failed to halt the shooting. Therefore, in accordance with the Mission's mandate and rules of engagement, the MINUSMA helicopters fired at and destroyed the rocket launcher. MNLA issued a statement accusing MINUSMA of having killed and injured some of its men. On 21 January, the Platform claimed that its forces had destroyed the Coordination position and called on MINUSMA to allow the armed groups to continue fighting in Tabankort.

19. The Mission's robust response in Tabankort triggered a series of demonstrations in support of and against MINUSMA. Coordination supporters

protested against MINUSMA in Kidal on 23 January, vandalizing and occupying the Kidal airstrip until 16 February, and in Menaka on 25 January. In Ber, however, the population ignored the Coordination's calls for protest, owing to the Mission's role in preventing an attack from GATIA on Ber early in January. In Gao, youth associations organized a demonstration in support of MINUSMA on 23 January.

20. Meanwhile, in accordance with its good offices mandate, the Mission attempted to facilitate the establishment of a local ceasefire in Tabankort to prevent further violence, obtain the withdrawal of Coordination and Platform armed groups from Tabankort, and the establishment of a temporary weapons-free security zone between Almoustarat (Gao region) and Anefis (Kidal region). In the course of parallel consultations with Coordination and Platform parties on a possible ceasefire, the Coordination manipulated a working document signed by MINUSMA and the Coordination, adding its logo and that of the United Nations, which it published on a social media site on 24 January. Malian authorities, the Platform and civil society groups strongly objected to this document and accused MINUSMA of seeking to displace Platform armed groups from the area. On 25 January, a delegation of representatives of youth groups and Platform armed groups in Gao warned MINUSMA that demonstrations would occur in protest against the alleged agreement between MINUSMA and the Coordination.

21. On 26 January, in Gao, a rally organized by the same youth groups and Platform representatives turned violent, protesters pelting the MINUSMA camp with stones and demanding that MINUSMA denounce the alleged agreement and its terms. On 27 January, protesters tried to force their way into the camp, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails and targeting MINUSMA formed police units. MINUSMA responded with tear gas and warning shots, while gunfire was also directed at demonstrators. The Gao regional hospital subsequently reported that three demonstrators were killed and 18 wounded, four by gunshots. Five MINUSMA formed police unit officers were also injured. On 28 January, protesters threw stones at another MINUSMA camp in Gao; MINUSMA fired tear gas to disperse the crowd. On 29 January, during his first visit to Gao since assuming office, President Keïta called on local actors to continue to cooperate with the Mission. He visited the Gao hospital where he met with those wounded during the demonstrations as well as GATIA and MAA-Platform combatants who had been injured in Tabankort. On 29 January, I announced the launch of an inquiry to establish the facts surrounding the violent demonstration in Gao on 27 January and appointed three independent experts to conduct swift and comprehensive investigations. The inquiry team began its work in Bamako and Gao on 20 February. Its report is to be completed by the end of March.

22. On 8 February, 17 MAA-Coordination combatants arrived on armed vehicles in Agouni (Timbuktu region) and occupied the town. They removed the Malian national flag from the municipal building and replaced it with an MAA-Coordination flag. Subsequently, schools were closed, humanitarian actors suspended their operations and transport vehicles stopped going to Agouni. On 26 February, the joint observation and verification team of Timbuktu, which has been operational since January, conducted its first assessment mission to Agouni. The composition of the Timbuktu team was completed on 10 March with the arrival of members from MNLA and HCUA.

23. MINUSMA continued its efforts to operationalize the Mixed Technical Commission on Security by establishing a permanent secretariat with dedicated capacity. The joint observation and verification teams conducted assessment missions to the six remaining locations over which control is contested by the parties. The resumption of hostilities, however, derailed the programme of work of the Commission, resulting in the cancellation of its monthly meeting in February. The Coordination continued not to participate in the Commission, contesting the participation of GATIA, which is not a signatory of the road map of 24 July 2014. Progress on the operationalization of the Kidal joint observation and verification team remained stalled.

Attacks by violent extremist groups

24. The reporting period saw a rise in the activity of violent extremist groups, including attacks against civilians. MINUSMA recorded 10 attacks in December (nine against MINUSMA, one against civilians), 18 in January (nine against MINUSMA, seven against civilians, one against the Malian defence and security forces and government personnel, one against MNLA), 14 in February (three against MINUSMA, one against Operation Barkhane, five against the Malian defence and security forces, five against civilians) and 13 in March as at 16 March (four against MINUSMA, two against Operation Barkhane, two against the Malian armed forces, five against civilians). Hostile acts against MINUSMA peacekeepers resulted in three peacekeepers killed and 35 injured during the reporting period.

25. On 24 December in Gao region, two mortar shells launched towards the joint MINUSMA-Operation Barkhane camp in Ansongo landed in the vicinity of the camp without causing casualties or damage. On 29 December, at least 15 rockets or mortar shells were fired at shared MINUSMA-Operation Barkhane-Malian armed forces infrastructures in Tessalit (Kidal region), including one rocket that landed inside the camp perimeter, destroying a vehicle of the Malian armed forces. On 31 December, at least three rockets or mortar shells landed in the vicinity of the airstrip in Tessalit. On 17 January, a complex attack was launched against the shared MINUSMA-Operation Barkhane camp in Kidal. Two vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices exploded at the northern entrance of the camp and at a MINUSMA checkpoint, 1 km east of the camp, while at least eight rockets and mortars were simultaneously launched at the camp. The MINUSMA force repelled the assailants but one peacekeeper manning the checkpoint was killed and another peacekeeper was injured. On 8 March, the camp was attacked again; six shells landed inside the same camp, killing one peacekeeper and wounding eight. MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane returned fire and ended the attack. In the course of the attack, two shells hit a civilian encampment, resulting in three civilians killed and two injured. The injured civilians were evacuated by MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane.

26. Attacks using progressively sophisticated improvised explosive devices continued unabated against MINUSMA throughout its areas of operation. From 17 December to 16 March, the Mission recorded 10 attacks with such devices against its personnel, resulting in one killed and 28 injured (11 injured in Kidal region; one killed and 16 injured in Gao region; and one injured in Segou region). On 18 December, a MINUSMA vehicle hit an explosive device 200 m from the Mission's camp in Aguelhok (Kidal region), resulting in three peacekeepers injured. The MINUSMA force pursued and arrested the suspects, who are members of

(UCA). The MINUSMA force handed them over to the Malian gendarmerie on 21 December. On 27 and 28 December, two radio-controlled improvised explosive devices found on parked United Nations vehicles in Gao were neutralized. On 21 January, a MINUSMA vehicle that struck an improvised explosive device 60 km east of Ansongo was subsequently fired at by unidentified assailants. One peacekeeper who sustained serious wounds later succumbed to his injuries.

27. There were increasing reports of extremist activity in the formerly peaceful regions of Ségou and Mopti. A first such attack also occurred in Bamako. On 5 January, armed men attacked Nampala (Ségou region) near the Mauritanian border, killing 11 soldiers of the Malian armed forces and injuring three. On 6 January, armed men attacked Dioura (Mopti region), 50 km south-west of Nampala, and set the town hall and the prefecture building on fire. On 8 January, armed men attacked the Fenenkou prefecture in Mopti region. A newly-created violent extremist group, the Massina Liberation Front, claimed responsibility for that attack on 16 January. On the same day, in Fenenkou, in fighting between armed men and the Malian armed forces, three soldiers were killed and five wounded. On 14 February, an attack by armed men on an armed forces position in Youwarou Cercle (Mopti region) resulted in two soldiers and six insurgents killed, and three soldiers wounded. On 7 March, two gunmen opened fire at a restaurant in Bamako, killing five people and injuring nine, including two international personnel seconded to the United Nations Mine Action Service. On the same day, Al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for the attack in a video released by a Mauritanian news agency.

Protection of civilians

28. On 6 March, MINUSMA adopted a comprehensive protection of civilians strategy. The strategy outlines a coherent and coordinated framework for the implementation of the Mission's protection mandate. Protection officers were deployed to the Gao and Timbuktu offices. From 19 to 24 February, military and civilian components of MINUSMA jointly visited a remote area south of Ansongo, where there have been a high number of violent incidents, to enhance civilians' security and sensitize the population on the Mission's mandate. The Mission intends to conduct similar operations elsewhere in the country. On 12 February, MINUSMA launched Radio Mikado in Gao and Timbuktu to reach out to and engage with local populations, including on the MINUSMA mandate and functions. The Mission plans to expand broadcasting activities to other locations.

IV. Re-establishment of State authority

29. The progress in the re-establishment of State authority that had been made early in 2014 receded in some parts of the north. There was no significant advance in the deployment of Malian security forces (national police, civil protection, gendarmerie and national guard). As at 15 March, only 1,995 security personnel were deployed across northern Mali, Bourem (Gao region) being the northernmost point of deployment. A widespread sense of insecurity persists in localities with minimal presence of security forces, such as Baye and Ouenkoro (Mopti region). In Gao, Mopti and Timbuktu regions, overall, 95 per cent of prefects are deployed and performing their functions, as are roughly 75 per cent of sub-prefects, the latter representing a drop of 5 per cent compared to the previous reporting period. Six

sub-prefects left Tenenkou Cercle in the wake of the January attacks. There is still no presence of State administrators in Kidal. On 10 February, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization instructed all Kidal state representatives to report to Gao pending their redeployment to Kidal. Sixty-seven per cent of the planned judicial and corrections personnel are deployed in northern Mali. In spite of the promulgation on 26 December of two decrees reappointing magistrates to jurisdictions, only 7 of 12 tribunals and related prosecutors' offices and 7 of 12 prisons remain operational.

30. Access to basic services has not improved in northern Mali. While 92 per cent of health centres in the four northern regions are functioning, all of them depend on support from humanitarian organizations. Up to 58 per cent of water infrastructure remained non-functioning in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu regions. In Mopti and Segou regions, 67 schools closed following the attacks in January, depriving 9,134 students of education. In Kidal region, all schools remained officially closed for the fourth consecutive year, although community initiatives managed to hold unofficial classes in 14 schools.

31. On 4 March, MINUSMA began renovating the Police Academy by means of a $4.5 million project funded by the Government of Japan. During the reporting period, MINUSMA police further strengthened its transnational organized crime cell, which now totals 17 officers, four of whom are co-located with Malian transnational organized crime-related units. MINUSMA police continued to deliver technical assistance, capacity-building initiatives, mentoring programmes, and specialized training for Malian police officers.

32. The European Union police training mission in Mali officially established its presence in the country on 10 February 2015, and 39 staff are currently deployed. While collaboration modalities and division of labour between the United Nations and the European Union are still being defined, liaison officers have been appointed and police experts from both missions provided joint training to Malian officers in public order management in February.

33. MINUSMA continued to work towards the development of coordination structures for national security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes by establishing a technical working group to coordinate international initiatives in support of the Government's National Council for Security Sector Reform. The first meeting of the technical working group held on 20 February brought together representatives of MINUSMA, the European Union, ECOWAS, the European Union training mission in Mali and the European Union police training mission.

V. Human rights

34. MINUSMA documented violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, ranging from arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances to civilian casualties and ill-treatment. On 1 January, GATIA combatants beat two drivers and confiscated their vehicles at a checkpoint in Ber. On 7 January, two men from the Tuareg community were victims of ill-treatment by members of GATIA who had arrested them in Tessit (Gao region). On 23 January, in Tin-Wazadi (Timbuktu region), one woman was shot dead and her child injured during clashes between MNLA and CMFPR-I. On 28 January in Didi, MNLA shot a Songhai man

in the leg after the latter had refused to stop at a checkpoint. On 30 January in Kano (Timbuktu region), the Coordination arbitrarily arrested 54 persons, including children, and detained them in Ber until 3 February.

35. The continued unlawful detention of civilians for prolonged periods by the Platform and the Coordination on ethnic grounds is of particular concern. Around 20 January, MNLA arrested four GATIA combatants in Tabankort and detained them in Kidal. On 11 February, GATIA arrested five men and two boys in Ersane (Gao region), and handed them over to the Malian armed forces and the gendarmerie. They were all released on 21 February with no legal consequences. In mid-February, the Platform released six persons in Tabankort, while the Coordination released five persons in Ber. As these civilians were unlawfully seized and detained not in relation to military hostilities, security or the commission of a crime, and they were released only as a result of an exchange of persons, the conduct of the Coordination and the Platform could be qualified as hostage-taking. MINUSMA is aware that other civilians continue to be held by armed groups, including three civilians being held by the Platform since January, presumably in Tabankort. An elderly counsellor and MNLA supporter from Anefis was arrested by the Platform on 20 January while travelling to Tabankort and died in detention.

36. There was no progress in the prosecution of alleged human rights violations by Malian authorities. The two court cases against General Sanogo did not progress, one case being in the pre-trial phase and the indictment in the other case still being formulated. The killing of 16 preachers in a Malian armed forces camp in Diabaly (Segou region) in September 2012 remained under investigation as did the summary execution of three individuals from the Tuareg community by Malian soldiers in Djebock (Gao region) in February 2014; the shooting of an unarmed detainee by prison guards in Gao on 3 October 2014; and the indiscriminate firing by a Malian soldier in a public place in Gao, killing one civilian and injuring five, on 16 November 2014. In addition, no investigation has been initiated into the killing on 12 April 2014 of a Dogon man by police officers in Mopti.

37. As at 11 March, 236 persons remained in detention by Malian authorities in relation to the conflict since 2012, including 26 whose release has been requested by armed groups under the confidence-building measures foreseen in the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement. On 18 December, the Criminal Court (Cour d'assises) in Bamako issued a judgement on a conflict-related case for the first time, with a sentence of five years' detention for conspiracy, insurrection, terrorism and illegal possession of weapons and munitions of war.

Violations of women's rights

38. Judicial proceedings for the 80 criminal complaints of sexual violence allegedly committed by members of armed groups in 2012, filed by local non-governmental human rights organizations in November 2014, have not progressed. Judges have yet to be selected to oversee their adjudication. Twenty-four cases, also filed by non-governmental organizations, remained pending at the First Instance Tribunal of Timbuktu, as the First Instance Tribunal of Bamako Commune III, which is tasked by the Supreme Court to process all conflict-related cases, has not yet selected the members of a commission that will decide on the possible transfer of the 24 cases from Timbuktu to Bamako.

Violations of children's rights

39. Children continued to be sighted within the ranks of MNLA, HCUA and GATIA, while MNLA, HCUA, the MAA-Coordination, the MAA-Platform, and CPA continued to occupy 20 schools in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu regions. From 16 to 18 December, MINUSMA held discussions in Kidal with MNLA and HCUA on their alleged recruitment and use of children. HCUA committed itself to undertake an age assessment of its combatants and release any minors identified. MNLA, which has a record of extensive recruitment and use of children, stated that it had forbidden its combatants from committing such violations of children's rights.

40. Four cases of sexual violence against children aged between 11 and 15 years were reported, all rapes allegedly perpetrated by members of the Malian defence and security forces in Gao region in October and November 2014. The four children have received medical care. Investigations are ongoing on three cases; the Malian gendarmerie has arrested one suspect and one accomplice. However, in the fourth case, the alleged perpetrator, a senior police officer, was transferred to another duty station by Malian police authorities.

41. MINUSMA and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) continue to monitor the detention of children in Bamako prisons. Malian authorities released one child on 25 February but were unable to confirm the whereabouts of three other children who had previously been detained. As at 17 March, six children remained in detention in Bamako for alleged association with armed groups, one for as long as two years, in contravention of the protocol on the release and reintegration of children associated with the armed forces and armed groups of 1 July 2013.

VI. Humanitarian assistance

42. The deteriorating security situation continued to hamper humanitarian access in northern Mali. Over the reporting period, seven vehicles of humanitarian actors were carjacked, four on the Timbuktu-Goundam axis (Timbuktu region) and three in Bourem Cercle (Gao region). MINUSMA and the Malian armed forces have conducted coordinated patrols along the Timbuktu-Goundam axis. In Mopti and Segou regions, the attacks in January led to the temporary withdrawal of three international non-governmental organizations for about one month. Similarly, the temporary closure of the Kidal airfield in January and February severely hampered the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the region. Food distributions by the World Food Programme to school canteens in 10 communes in Timbuktu region have been suspended since 16 February owing to security concerns. In the same region, local authorities, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and MINUSMA identified concrete measures to facilitate and improve humanitarian access, some of which have already been implemented, such as reinforced presence and patrols of the Malian armed forces. The Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department of the European Commission and the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service increased the number of flights to northern Mali in January and February, respectively.

43. There was a decrease in the number of internally displaced persons: there were 61,621 persons as at 31 December, down from 86,216 in October 2014. The number of Malian refugees registered in neighbouring countries also decreased,

132,915 persons were registered as at 31 January in comparison to 143,530 in mid-November 2014.

44. The 2015 Humanitarian Strategic Response Plan, which was launched in New York on 12 February by the Emergency Relief Coordinator as part of the global launch of the $2 billion appeal for the Sahel, was introduced in Bamako on 26 February by the Humanitarian Coordinator. The Strategic Response Plan for Mali amounts to $377 million, half of which is directed towards addressing the needs of conflict-affected people in northern and central Mali, while the other half is dedicated to responding to persisting food insecurity and malnutrition nationwide. This appeal is $200 million lower than the 2014 appeal because of the Government's mobilization and a decrease in identified food security needs.

45. On 18 January 2015, the Government of Mali and the World Health Organization announced the end of the Ebola epidemic in Mali after 42 days without any new registered case.

VII. Early recovery and development

46. On 17 and 18 December, the Immediate Response Facility of the Peacebuilding Fund announced funding for four projects in Mali for a total of $7.6 million, including projects in support of women and youth, returnees, education and the future cantonment process that will be implemented by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, UNICEF, the United Nations Office for Project Services and MINUSMA for 18 months from early 2015 to mid-2016.

47. On 19 December, MINUSMA and the United Nations country team finalized the United Nations Development Assistance Framework for 2015-2019. With an envelope of over $1.1 billion, the Framework for 2015-2019 provides that United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and MINUSMA will focus their efforts in support of the Government on four main priorities, namely, (a) peace, security and reconciliation; (b) good governance; (c) access to social services; and (d) sustainable development.

48. On 30 January, MINUSMA launched its regional stabilization and recovery plan for Gao region. The plan was developed further to wide consultations with regional authorities, technical and financial partners and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, as well as a security and conflict analysis conducted jointly with the MINUSMA All Sources Information Fusion Unit. The plan identifies priority zones and proposes concrete actions under five overall objectives: enabling security environment, including protection of civilians; restoration of State authority; economic recovery; provision of basic social services; and social cohesion. Similar regional plans for Timbuktu and Mopti have been developed and are pending endorsement by all stakeholders.

49. From 28 to 30 January, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organized an international conference on the ancient Malian manuscripts in Bamako. Participants called for the adoption of an emergency plan to preserve the manuscripts and recommended the digital archiving of manuscripts in Bamako to help conserve them. One of four private libraries in

Timbuktu was renovated by a joint MINUSMA-UNESCO quick-impact project in January.

50. On 4 February, preliminary findings of the joint MINUSMA-World Bank research on the socioeconomic impact of MINUSMA were released. The total economic impact of MINUSMA expenditure in Mali approximated $69 million in its first year, which amounts to approximately 0.7 per cent of the Malian GDP. 45 per cent of which stems from direct spending by personnel and contingents. MINUSMA expenditure did not generate overall inflation, although the prices of some specific products were perceived to have risen as a consequence of the Mission's presence. The study concluded that the United Nations and international donors represented an important source of employment. MINUSMA created 670 jobs; while directly and indirectly created jobs were assessed to have generated some 2,000 to 3,000 positions.

VIII. Expansion and operationalization of the Mission

51. As at 13 March, 78 per cent of all MINUSMA civilian staff had deployed; 80 per cent of authorized international posts, 79 per cent of United Nations Volunteers positions and 75 per cent of all national posts were filled. The MINUSMA police component was staffed at 73 per cent of its authorized strength of 1,440 as at 13 March, with 63 per cent of the authorized individual police officers and 76 per cent of the planned formed police unit personnel on the ground, including an additional formed police unit that is in the process of deploying. Also as at 13 March, 79 per cent of the authorized military strength of 11,200 has deployed.

52. While the Mission's second reserve battalion commenced deployment on 26 February, outstanding deployments, including of an infantry battalion in Sector West and helicopter units, continued to hamper the force's ability to fulfil its mandate and protect convoy movements. Faced with continuing attacks on MINUSMA civilian contracted convoys, the force did its utmost to provide escorts although it is severely overstretched. A total of 11 attacks occurred against MINUSMA contracted convoys, including an attack on 4 January 60 km north of Gao between Anefis and Gao, in which seven vehicles were burned while their cargo remained intact, and an attack on 10 January 70 km east of Ansongo, which resulted in two trucks burned by two armed men. The MINUSMA forces have repelled attacks against convoys under their escort, for example when assailants launched an attack using mortars and machine guns against a convoy of 31 contractor vehicles travelling from Gao to Kidal under MINUSMA escort 23 km south of Almoustarat on 10 March. On 13 March, when approximately 30 assailants launched an ambush against MINUSMA-escorted vehicles near Indelimane on the Menaka-Ansongo axis, the force returned fire and captured four assailants; they were handed over to the Malian authorities in Bamako on 16 March.

53. Efforts were made to upgrade remote deployment locations and enhance the Mission's capacity to respond to medical emergencies. The Mission developed a rotation plan for Sector North covering Kidal region, which will be implemented upon the arrival of the reserve battalion. The level II hospital was relocated from Sevare to Kidal and reached full operating capability. The deployment of an additional military aviation unit with a tactical military transport aircraft (CASA

2953) in January facilitated the Mission's medical and casualty evacuation flights in locations where fixed-wing aircraft can land. Meanwhile, Operation Barkhane continues to support the Mission with night casualty evacuations. The MINUSMA level I hospital in Bamako was upgraded to "level I plus" to include a small operating room and a small intensive care ward.

54. Good progress in MINUSMA construction was made despite persisting serious security constraints. The completion of horizontal engineering works at the Gao, Kidal, Tessalit and Timbuktu integrated camps in January enabled the deployment of additional military and police capacity into northern Mali, notably the relocation of one infantry battalion from Dyabali (Segou region) to Gao. All main camp locations and the majority of minor sites are already occupied to some degree, and additional personnel are moving in as office and accommodation space are constructed. Contractual arrangements for work at six integrated and seven military camps are now in place; three additional contracts are to be awarded by the end of March. In Bamako, the construction of the new Mission headquarters is progressing at the site near the airport; it is expected that MINUSMA staff will relocate to the new site late in 2015.

55. Although the Mission completed the extension of the Kidal and Tessalit runways late in December, expanding payload capacity to those destinations, the security incidents described in section III above resulted in the closure of both airstrips for repairs. On 19 January, the Tessalit airstrip reopened for emergency response and limited operations pending finalization of bunker construction. The inaccessibility of the Kidal airstrip from 21 January to 16 February and persistent security threats to road convoys delayed the construction of infrastructure necessary for the deployment of the medium-sized military utility helicopter unit, initially planned in March and now postponed to mid-May.

56. The Mission continued to implement its counter-improvised explosive device programme. From 17 December to 8 March, the two explosive ordnance disposal and route verification companies conducted 93 missions in support of convoy movements, daily road clearance tasks, and post-blast investigations, as well as to neutralize improvised explosive devices and remove unexploded ordnance. The Mine Action Service delivered courses on improvised explosive device safety response to 859 military personnel, as well as training in the use of individual first aid kits to 856 others. Other measures implemented include training of incoming military explosive ordnance disposal companies; the transfer of seven mine-protected vehicles to contingents in the north; and preparations for the pre-deployment training of infantry companies. In addition to Mine Action Service mentors embedded with the eight MINUSMA explosive ordnance disposal teams in Kidal, the Mission is still seeking in-kind mentors to coach troops on asymmetric attack risk mitigation.

57. In the light of the significant changes to the political and security operational environment in Mali since the establishment of the Mission's plans in 2013, MINUSMA is undertaking a review of its mission concept and the concepts of operations of related components with a view to ensuring that the Mission identifies and focuses on a limited set of key political and stabilization priorities through an integrated effort.

IX. Observations

58. Mali is today at a turning point. After eight months of internationally facilitated talks, a draft peace agreement is now before the parties. If an agreement is reached, it could pave the way for an end to armed conflict and the start of sustainable reconciliation, reform and development in the north and elsewhere in Mali. The stakes are high. Violence is intensifying in and spreading beyond northern Mali, affecting the safety and security of civilians and the protection of their human rights, and preventing their access to education, health and other basic services. Violent extremism, organized crime and illicit trafficking thrive in such conditions and, if unchecked, threaten the very future of the Malian State. There is no military solution to these threats; they can be effectively countered only through a viable political process that yields implementable results. The people of Mali deserve no less.

59. The unprecedented level of engagement of the international community in support of peace reflects the seriousness of Mali's situation, and the strong commitment of the international community to the country, its people and the region. Ultimately, however, the decision to pursue peace is a Malian one. Without the determined will of the Malian parties and their constituencies to reach a final political settlement and to make the compromises necessary for peace to take root, the impact of international efforts will remain, at best, limited.

60. A negotiated agreement is a precondition for progress towards peace. However, it is only the first step in a long journey towards peace, security, reconciliation and development, a journey which calls for continuing dialogue. The draft agreement currently before the Malian parties provides a framework for such a sustained dialogue. It captures many of the political, institutional, security and development issues at stake and provides the basis for their negotiated resolution during the critical implementation phase. I urge the Malian parties to seize this historical opportunity and thereby take ownership of their future.

61. I congratulate the Algerian lead mediator and all mediation team members for their dedicated efforts in support of a negotiated settlement. If the Malian parties are prepared to commit themselves to an agreement, the international community has undertaken to act as its guarantor and to actively support its implementation. It is critical that Mali's partners maintain the unity that they have shown to date and, as dialogue continues, begin to put in place the implementation and support mechanisms, including financial, that will be required to ensure a viable peace.

62. Inevitably, there is a deficit of trust between the Malian parties. Communities are polarized. Spoilers, including violent extremists, will seek to maintain unfettered access for illicit trafficking in northern Mali, preying upon civilians. Clear and robust implementation mechanisms can contribute to building mutual trust and confidence in the prospects for peace and to helping to resolve the differences that will inevitably emerge as long-standing issues are practically addressed. The United Nations stands ready to continue playing its role in supporting dialogue and, if successful, the implementation of an agreed peace. My Special Representative and MINUSMA remain committed to providing good offices, assisting national reconciliation and supporting the establishment of defence and security provisions of an agreement.

63. While political progress was being made in Algiers, all parties regrettably continued to violate the ceasefire on the ground, including in the Ifoghas Valley and in Ber late in December 2014 and in January 2015. I call on all parties to refrain from any further military actions that could jeopardize the success of the peace process in this delicate phase, and to abide by their ceasefire commitments by participating in and supporting the activities of the ceasefire management bodies, the joint observation and verification teams and the Mixed Technical Commission on Security.

64. I remain highly concerned at the potential for intercommunal violence and the manipulation of public sentiment at this sensitive moment in the peace process. All Malian parties have a responsibility to communicate with their constituencies and to address legitimate grievances and concerns in a peaceful manner. They also have an obligation not to misrepresent the role of MINUSMA. The violent demonstration against a MINUSMA camp that resulted in the death and injury of protestors on 27 January in Gao is of serious concern. I am committed to shedding full light on the events surrounding that terrible incident and to determine the role and responsibilities of the United Nations. The independent inquiry I established for this purpose will conclude its work at the end of March.

65. I condemn in the strongest terms continuing attacks on United Nations personnel and civilians and call on the Government of Mali to swiftly investigate these attacks, which may constitute war crimes under international law. I am profoundly saddened by each and every death and injury and take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences to the families of the victims of these heinous crimes as well as to the Government of Mali and the Governments of the countries of the United Nations peacekeepers who lost their lives in the line of duty. The terrorist attack in Bamako on 8 March, as well as the asymmetric attacks against Government forces south of the Niger bend, provided stark reminders that insecurity is not confined to the far north of Mali.

66. The French Operation Barkhane has continued to provide in extremis support to MINUSMA throughout this period, including for the medical evacuation of injured United Nations peacekeepers. I am grateful for this continuing support, which is provided within the distinct mandate of each entity.

67. Continuing violence, particularly banditry and extremist activity, is severely hampering the delivery of humanitarian assistance to communities and individuals in greatest need. I call on all parties to contribute to the creation of a secure environment for humanitarian access. I further encourage international partners to contribute generously to the 2015 Humanitarian Strategic Response Plan, half of which is directed towards addressing the emergency needs of conflict-affected people in northern and central Mali.

68. The peace process must urgently translate into tangible gains for the people of Mali. While the re-establishment of public services in the far north requires coordination between the parties, ideally through the implementation of a peace agreement, I encourage the Government to already deploy security forces and civil servants, including teachers and health personnel, in the areas under its control. This would send a positive signal to the populations north of the Niger River that the central authority is committed to meeting its responsibilities and to providing the same level of services to all Malian citizens.

69. MINUSMA operates in some of the most austere and hostile environments known to peacekeeping. United Nations peacekeepers remain the sole regular force with a constant presence throughout northern Mali and as such are the primary target of violent extremist group attacks. This comes inevitably at high human and financial cost. I welcome the exhaustive array of security measures being implemented by the Mission in the wake of the informal interactive dialogue on Mali held by the Security Council in November 2014. I remain committed to identifying and implementing further innovative measures to ensure the implementation of the MINUSMA mandate while enhancing protection. I encourage all troop- and police-contributing countries and all bilateral donors to continue their efforts to ensure that the adequate number of personnel deploy with the capabilities necessary to operate in this exceedingly challenging environment.

70. Lastly, I wish to express my appreciation to Mr. Mongi Hamdi, my Special Representative for Mali, and to all United Nations civilian and uniformed personnel in Mali, for their continuing hard work in very difficult conditions to restore lasting peace and stability in the country. I would also like to thank all troop- and police-contributing countries, the African Union, ECOWAS, the European Union and bilateral partners, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, non-governmental organizations and all other partners for their important contributions in support of the peace process in Mali.